

Clipped TONES

This garden has matured into the soothing and sophisticated retreat its designer had envisioned.

Photographs JASON BUSCH Words LUCY MUNRO

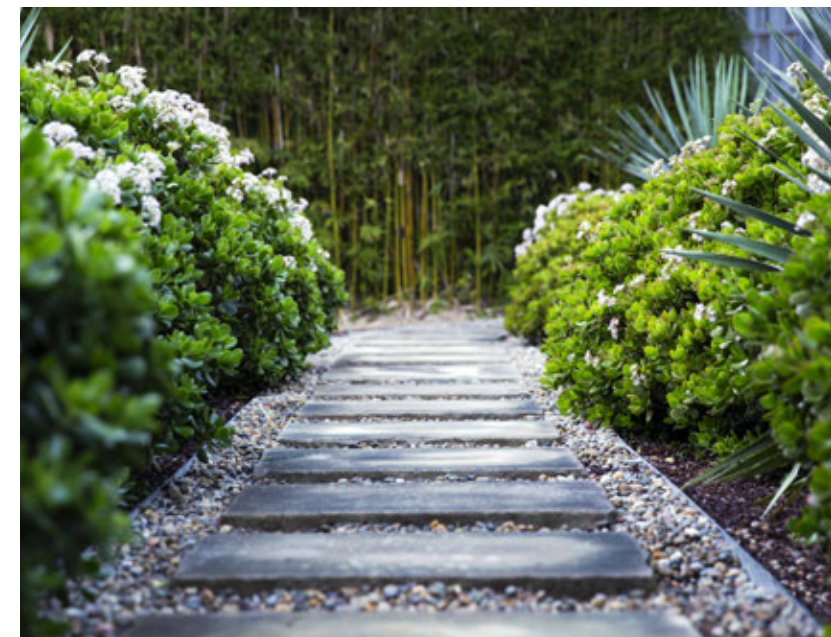
This page, clockwise from top: Mounded spikes of *Dracaena draco* are like living sculptures emerging from a jade carpet. River pebbles are used as a mulch. Sandstone pavers lead through the garden. Opposite page: Clipped magenta lilly pilly hedges contain a courtyard garden of *Dracaena draco* and *crassula*.

Tucked away in the leafy suburb of Longueville on Sydney's lower north shore is a sprawling garden oasis with soaring views across Woodford Bay and the Lane Cove River. Designed by a master of understated elegance, Hugh Main of Spirit Level Designs, the garden is a union of sculpted and organic, intimate and expansive, rugged and soft – the perfect companion to the crisp, minimalist architecture of the Stanic Harding-designed home.

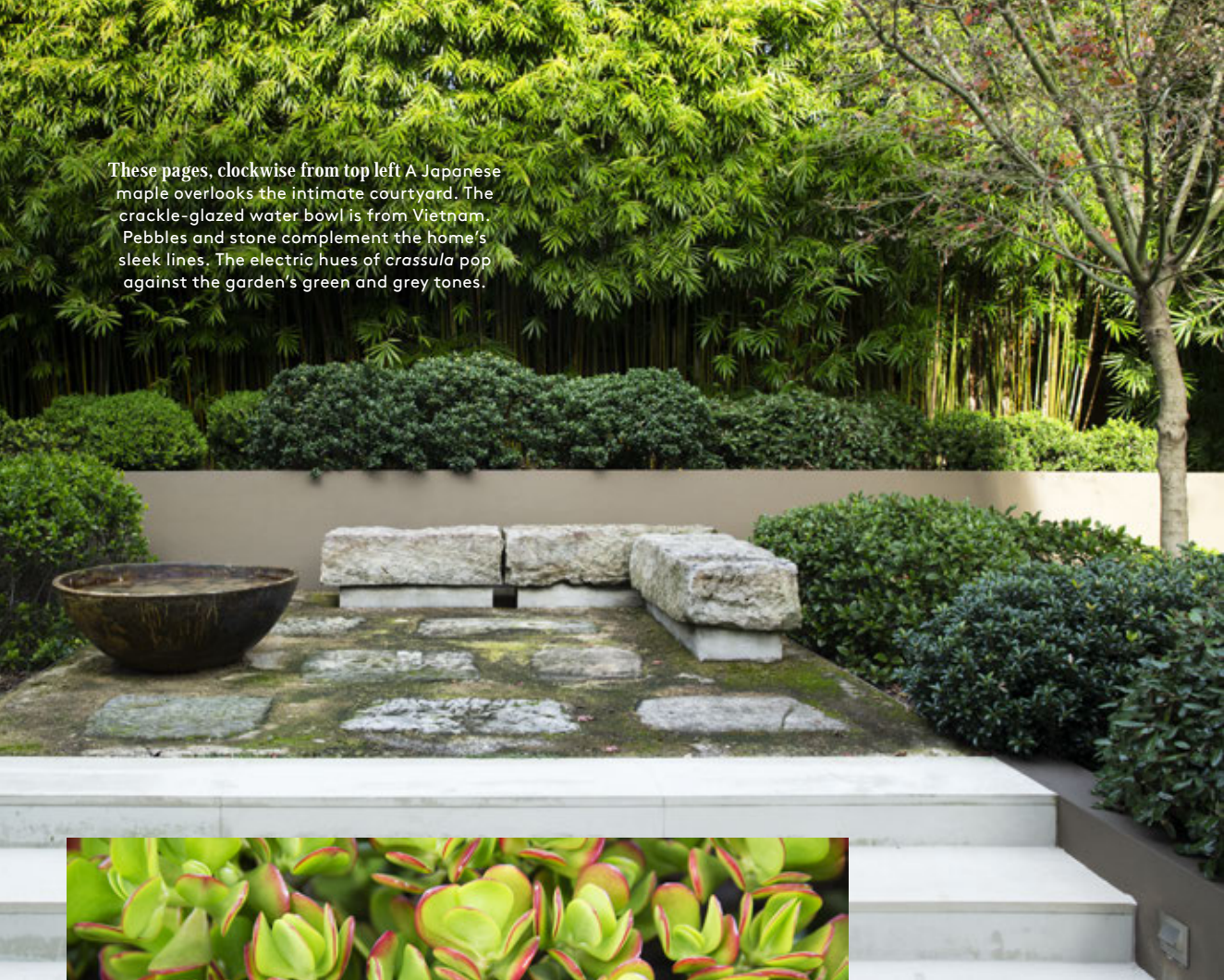
Initially planted in 2011, the garden evolved from an understanding between the owner, architect and landscape designer to create a private family haven in harmony with the strong, elegant lines of the building and the magnificent surrounding Sydney landscape. Now well on its way to maturity, clipped mounds of *westringia*, *raphiolepis* and *elaeanthus* contrast against textured layers of bamboo, softening the starkness of the architecture and framing a quiet and restful space, a retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city. "When you're designing, you're creating this space in your head and when it's first planted it's really immature," explains Hugh. "It's so lovely to return to the garden years later to find it has grown into that place I had dreamed of all along."

At the end of the northern pavilion, an arresting courtyard of *crassula* and *Dracaena draco* is framed by clipped hedges of magenta *syzygium*. The velvety grey spikes of *Dracaena draco* look like living pieces of sculpture emerging from a carpet of flowering lime green jade and overlook the sandstone path leading to the intimate space.

The quiet enclosure opens to reveal an expansive lawn and elegant pool area in harmony with the clean linear structure of the building. In the far corner, the dark-tiled pool adds another dimension to the grounds as the sky is drawn in from above, casting shadows and reflections across the opaque water surface. "The idea is that everything is subtle, it complements each other and isn't



These pages, clockwise from top left A Japanese maple overlooks the intimate courtyard. The crackle-glazed water bowl is from Vietnam. Pebbles and stone complement the home's sleek lines. The electric hues of *Crassula* pop against the garden's green and grey tones.



struggling against the architecture,” says Hugh of his design style. “I’m not trying to shock or jar. I want to create a place of calmness, quiet and serenity. I want to soothe people as they walk through a garden of mine.”

A favourite spot of Hugh’s in this garden is the girl’s courtyard – a tranquil setting inspired by Japanese zen gardens and the wabi-sabi philosophy of beauty in imperfection. Rough-cut Sydney sandstone, echoing the home’s cladding, rests as a centre bench, bordered on one side by a gorgeous crackle-glazed Vietnamese water bowl and by a lone Japanese maple tree on the other.

No detail has been overlooked – as seen from the main living pavilion, a pebbled rooftop sculpture of small and large Nepean river pebbles inspired by the work of British land artist Sir Richard Long is arranged in a spherical form. Bordering the terrace doorways is an assortment of handmade charcoal and copper vessels, planted with a spectrum of textured green and grey succulents.

At every twist and turn, the hidden pockets and sweeping grounds of this handsome property are alive with mystery, contemplation and refined style, a testament to the elegance of the architecture and the skill of the designer. “I like the journey through the garden,” Hugh says. “I discovered a breath within the space. As you breathe in, you find a large open area and as you exhale you retreat into a more intimate, private setting. It’s such a lovely feeling exploring a garden like that.”

For more go to spiritlevel.com.au.



“The idea is that everything is subtle, it complements each other and isn’t struggling against the architecture.”



“I want to create a place of calmness, quiet and serenity.”



This page, clockwise from top The dark-tiled pool is a standout feature in the garden that mirrors reflections and shadows from above across its surface. A collection of varied succulents in handmade charcoal planters line the terrace. Textured plantings of bamboo around the borders of the property create a garden oasis within.